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GEORGE DAVIDSON (1825–1911)

Fellow in Class I, Section 1, 1887.

George Davidson was born in Nottingham, England, on May 9, 1825. Coming to the United States when a boy, he completed the course of study in the Central High School, Philadelphia, in 1845. He entered the service of the United States Coast Survey on June 1, 1845, in Washington, as secretary to Superintendent Bache. He served also as a computer and in other capacities.

The needs of navigation for accurate knowledge of the Pacific coast-line were recognized by the authorities in Washington shortly after the territory of California was acquired from Mexico. The first requirements were determinations of the latitudes and longitudes of the prominent capes, head-lands and entrances to the harbors, hydrographic surveys of the harbors, and topographic surveys of harbor surroundings. Davidson was the oldest member and the leader of a party of three sent to the Pacific Coast shortly after the discovery of gold in California, for the purpose of starting the accurate work of the Survey. The party arrived in the summer of 1850. With the exception of five years, coinciding approximately with the Civil War, Davidson's home was in San Francisco continuously until the date of his death, December 2, 1911.

Assistant Davidson's first observing station on the Pacific Coast, in 1850, was located at Point Conception, the most prominent and dangerous angle in the western coast-line of the United States. He determined the latitude and longitude, the variation and dip of the magnetic needle, and he reported upon the best location for the proposed light-house in that neighborhood. In the next four years other stations were occupied at prominent points on the coast between Puget Sound and Monterey. Astronomic, magnetic, hydrographic and topographic data which were accumulated with extraordinary rapidity were woven by him into a report as early as 1855, and issued as a guide to mariners. Davidson's Directory for the Pacific Coast, issued in 1858, was a remarkably accurate and comprehensive work, embodying his own and other authentic data affecting maritime interests on the coast.

The construction of the Union and Central Pacific Railways and the establishing of telegraphic connection between the Atlantic and Pacific Coasts enabled the longitude determinations on the Pacific Coast to be placed upon an accurate basis. The Pacific end of the longitude time comparisons with Harvard College Observatory was conducted by Mr. Davidson in a temporary observatory set up in Washington Square, San Francisco. Telegraphic signals were exchanged with Cambridge on twelve nights in February, March and April, 1869.

In June, 1895, Davidson resigned his position in the Coast Survey, at the conclusion of fifty years of service. During the last twenty-seven years of this period he was Assistant in Charge of all Coast Survey operations on the Pacific Coast of the United States.

The reports of the U. S. Coast Survey show that he never failed to grasp opportunities for making observations which promised to be useful in any branch of astronomy, pure or applied. He observed the total eclipse of the Sun of August, 1869, on the Chilkaht River, Alaska, and the total eclipse of January, 1880, on the summit of Santa Lucia Mountain in central California. He observed the transit of Venus, in behalf of the U. S. Government Commission, in Japan in 1874 and in New Mexico in 1882. He observed the transit of Mercury in the Sacramento Valley in 1881. He observed meteors and star occultations on many occasions. He was interested in testing atmospheric conditions as affecting astronomical observations. As a labor of love he made thousands of observations of latitude-pairs of stars, as a contribution to the subject of terrestrial latitude variation.

Davidson's influence with James Lick, when Mr. Lick was formulating plans for erecting the most powerful telescope in existence, was potent, and perhaps even vital to a practical solution of Mr. Lick's problem.

Professor Davidson was president of the California Academy of Sciences for sixteen years, and president of the Pacific Geographical Society for thirty years. He was an authority on the voyages of the early explorers of the Pacific Coast, and on the early history of the Coast. At various times and during periods of different lengths he served on the Irrigation Commission of California, on the Advisory Harbor Improvement Commission for San Francisco, on the Mississippi River Commission, on the United States Assay Commission, and as a Regent of the University of California. During the last years of his life he was Professor of Geography in the University of California. His life was devoted with untiring energy and complete unselfishness to the interests of science on the Pacific Coast. It is no exaggeration to say that during sixty years Professor Davidson's name was more familiar to the scientifically-inclined inhabitants of the Pacific Coast region than that of any other resident.

W. W. CAMPBELL.